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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/08/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN PRIESTS OPEN "CHURCH OF CHAVEZ"

REF: A. CARACAS 000810  
[1](#)B. 07 CARACAS 002089

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,  
REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) The Reformist Catholic Church of Venezuela announced its formation on June 26. Comprising former Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican priests, the Reformists are based in the small town of Ciudad Ojeda in Zulia State. The Reformist Church, which numbers around 2,000 parishioners according to local press, appointed Enrique Albornoiz its first bishop. Although the Reformist Church adopted some aspects of Roman Catholicism, it differs in several important respects, including acceptance of homosexuality and no requirement of celibacy for its priests. The Reformists say they will preach the benefits of socialism and Bolivarian values in addition to the Gospel. The group claims that it does not receive funding from the BRV or its dependencies, such as PDVSA.

[1](#)2. (C) The Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV) met the Reformist announcement with immediate and severe criticism. Cardinal Jorge Urosa announced that the Catholic Church would excommunicate priests associated with the Reformist Church, accusing them of attempting to divide the Catholic Church. Archbishop of Coro and CEV Vice President Roberto Luckert accused the Venezuelan government of funding the Reformist Church in an effort to "finish off the Catholic Church." At a June 29 mass attended by many in the diplomatic corps, including the Ambassador, Cardinal Urosa said the contentious relationship with the Venezuelan clergy complicates Venezuela-Vatican relations. He also stated his belief that the reformists were not a religious movement, but rather clearly a political creation.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment. President Chavez has had frequent, public confrontations with Catholic Church leaders. The Catholic Church remains one of the few institutions independent of the BRV with residual influence even in Chavez strongholds. The Church strongly opposed recent BRV initiatives such as Law of Intelligence and Counterintelligence (Ref A) and the failed December 2007 referendum (Ref B). The BRV's tacit approval of the creation and official registration of a "Bolivarian" Church mirrors past BRV efforts to create or encourage the establishment of parallel institutions when existing ones do not bend to government influence. End Comment.  
DUDDY